Denial of economic, social and cultural rights as a result of the applications of sanctions

1. The realization of social, economic and cultural rights is the cornerstone of the process of development, and is characterized by economic growth and increased production and consumption of goods and services. These rights seek to ensure the well-being of individuals and groups, improvement in living standards, education, health care and employment. Together these factors contribute to the dignity of the human person. The preamble of the Declaration of the Right to Development adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1986 describes development as "a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process, which aims at the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits resulting therefrom".

2. The World Council of Churches has long held the position that the rights elaborated in the Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Civil and Political Rights are indivisible and fundamental and should guide policy and decision-making processes of the United Nations including those of the Security Council, in relation to the applications of sanctions.

3. The post-Cold War period has witnessed the emergence of the Security Council as a major player in conflict mediation, where sanctions, because of their non-military character, have become a key instrument for peaceful resolution of conflicts. Nevertheless, many questions remain about their impact and efficacy. Foremost among them: what are the implications of sanctions on the poor and vulnerable in the target country? How do sanctions impact on the economic, social and cultural rights of the population in the target country?

4. Against this background, the World Council of Churches has serious concern about the application of sanctions in Iraq. These arise out of our regular contact with the people of Iraq as a result of the humanitarian relief assistance programmes of the Middle East Council of Churches that are carried out in close cooperation with the Iraqi Red Crescent Society and the United Nations humanitarian agencies in Iraq. A delegation of the World Council of Churches recently visited Iraq (17 to 27 January 1998) to study the effects of sanctions on the civilian population. It came to the following conclusions:

(a) The application of economic sanctions on Iraq has resulted in serious violations of human rights of large sections of the Iraqi population by denying them the rights to adequate food, clothing, housing, medical care, education, social services and employment.

(b) Health and sanitation are in a critical state. There has been a dramatic increase in mortality, morbidity and malnutrition, especially among children and other vulnerable groups. The application of sanctions has prevented repairs of basic infrastructure destroyed during the 1991 Gulf War. It has also made it impossible for the State to maintain adequately water, sanitation, and electric power systems essential to public health. This together with the degradation of schools, hospitals and other medical facilities, arable land, human resources and the general economy, have combined to create a grim scenario.

(c) The mechanisms for implementation of the sanctions regime have often created obstacles in the supply of humanitarian relief assistance to the detriment of the Iraqi people. The main problem, however, remains the seven-year long application of sanctions whose negative effects have not been substantially altered by the "Oil for Food" concession of the Security Council.

(d) Attendance in primary schools has dropped by 25 per cent (UNICEF) as children leave school to work at odd jobs, or beg on the streets. The number of teachers at schools have decreased. Schools lack in basic supplies such as pencils and papers, notebooks, blackboards and chalk. Many have broken toilets, with no access to any water. Many children come to school hungry as there are no supplementary feeding programmes. The educators are concerned that chronic malnutrition has permanently impaired the cognitive ability of primary school age.

(e) The bombing campaign of the Gulf War extensively damaged the electrical power stations and water treatment plants, particularly in South Iraq. The intermittent electric supply, combined with shortage of pumps, spare parts and reagents has been a major problem in the country. Lack of safe drinking water, combined with damaged sewage systems have resulted in increases in food and water-borne diseases such as typhoid fever, polio and hepatitis A. Typhoid fever has become a major health problem, with more than 27,000 cases reported in 1997 according to United Nations sources.

5. Sanctions if improperly conceived and monitored result in inflicting cruel and degrading punishment on the civilian population. The Central Committee of the World Council of Churches out of its concern for these negative aspects of sanctions commissioned a study in 1995. The study pointed out that economic sanctions are coercive by nature and can result in economic violence against whole peoples. It therefore developed its own criteria and guidelines for application of sanctions. (These are available for distribution on request.)

6. In adopting these criteria and guidelines for application of sanctions, the World Council of Churches believes that policies and actions of all institutions must be judged according to their impact on the poor, innocent and the weak. Sanctions regime must be designed in a way that will limit suffering of persons affected within the country whose policies they may be powerless to change.

7. We accordingly urge the Commission on Human Rights to:

(a) Request the High Commissioner for Human Rights to monitor the application of sanctions with a view to ensuring adequate promotion and protection of social, economic and cultural rights.

(b) Call for formation of a working group to develop criteria and guidelines, for imposition and application of sanctions, that ensures promotion and protection of human rights, and to submit its conclusions to the Security Council.

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